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the arts

07/22/05 Relic Reloaded - Hocking/Snider @ Art Cite

Clinton Snider/Scott Hocking
“RELICS & Other Works”

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Even from the street, casual passersby in front of Artcite Gallery can't help but notice the remains of a boat hull sweeping an arc through the middle of the space. This appears not unlike the fabled Ark of Noah come to its supposed rest on Mount Ararat. This partially intact hull is both representative of the larger body of work by Scott Hocking and Clinton Snider that comprises “Relics” and an excellent metaphor for their particular take on art and the environment that is Detroit. As the Ark served to preserve fragments of civilization destroyed by the deluge, this boat seems to have brought with it the remains of a once thriving city, not lost in a flood, but victim of the end of the industrial age and gradual abandonment by over half of its population. The original version of “Relics” was shown at the Detroit Institute of Arts several years ago and Hocking and Snider have become well known for their solo work since that time. The pair have crossed the river (no doubt by different means than this particular vessel) bringing this significant body of work with them.

For those who haven't spent much time in Detroit, it can seem like the land of the Planet of the Apes – ruins of a past age sticking up in the midst of a living city. Hocking and Snider are in some ways archaeologists, sifting through the urban ruins to create their work. They are finders and keepers of this past, always guided with an eye for the beauty that is in decay.

Like the DIA show, Hocking and Snider present the objects discovered in abandoned buildings now mounted inside individual wooden boxes, stacked together floor to ceiling creating cubby holes of sorts (not unlike one in which we might have stored our boots and mittens in elementary school.) This method of presentation harkens back to past ages of cabinets of wonders and card catalogues...And within each of these? As the title of the show implies, these are relics – a sign, some rope, a globe, toys, and the kitchen sink – everyday items once of some value, long since disregarded and allowed to decay.

The arrangement of the individual boxes seems happened upon yet not haphazard. There is an overall composition – we can view the individual boxes or the entire whole. Complementary forms balance out across the wall: a spiral of a hose resonates with a stove top grill, loose whorled wire, and spinning fan vents. While some boxes reinforce the grid within the grid (a crate of pop bottles, a segment of tile floor), others abandon this need for structure and lean to the chaotic – a smattering of gears, an explosion of clock assembly, a mess of bones. Besides form there is color, brilliant alongside decay, in one instance aged yellow paint, cracked and flaking on an electrical outlet – appearing as if a carpet of fallen fall leaves. The relics tend to stay within their containers near the bottom of the grid, but further up the whole – ladders, boat segments, stovepipes – extrude beyond the box walls. The piece grows, comes to life, shows that it can not be contained within simple walls.

We might get the feel of looking at the strata of the geological record. Though not one which unfolds chronologically as might happen at a field museum of such relics, but more happenstance, enabling us to draw our own ideas and make connections with the work emanating from our own experiences and the way in which we encounter each box. Rather than viewing the grid methodically (say top to bottom, left to right) it is likely the viewer will hop around – making a “knight’s tour” of the various boxes. (This term refers to the unusual way the “knight” moves on a chess board.) In this way, there is a constant sense of discovery – even though it seems we’ve visited a certain spot, we are constantly finding something not seen on a previous viewing.

There is a lot to take in, and perhaps an argument could be made that these are the “Elgin Marbles” of our day. Sure the ancient Greeks had trained artisans and much of “Relics” is the product of industrial mass manufacturing – but in the end everything falls apart and what survives tells a story about the people whose lives consisted of this stuff.

Despite not being part of the Relics wall, the boat is integral to the exhibition beyond its siren song to bring visitors into the space. Found with a tree growing through its disintegrated hull, the ark has been installed in the gallery making use of a column standing in for that tree. Appearing to emanate from a solitary wooden box mounted on the gallery’s back wall, the boat makes a graceful curve through the space neatly dividing (or perhaps connecting) the “Relics” proper work from the newer, solo works of Hocking and Snider. On the “Relics” side, is what survived high and dry on this metaphorical ship, while on the solo side, both artists’ works appear to have been affected by taking a dip in some liquid or another.



Hocking’s solo work also spins off of Relics – these are a series of photographs digitally reprinted from slides found in abandoned buildings. The slides suffered water damage (survived the flood?) and the effect is that rather mundane shots have become something entirely different, something organic, in their decay. These are quite in tune with his rust pieces and bearing little resemblance to the source material. Perhaps the most stunning set of these works are shots of the interior of a church. Up close, one can uncover evidence that this is indeed a church. Yet from a distance they could be aerial photographs of the landscape, a galaxy, something recognizable but not quite. As in Relics and Hocking’s other found object work, the action of entropy creates the aesthetic – there is beauty in the falling down.

These relics on display aren’t headless, limbless statues, but their connection to times past is no less important. With this exhibition, Snider and Hocking offer more than just another chance to see Relics and bring the work to a new audience (which they do and this is important.) They also build upon that initial work and show that their source material is as fertile and relevant as ever. It’s funny; the view of Detroit from Windsor is perhaps the most spectacular as a cityscape. Yet perhaps this perspective on Detroit (now in Windsor) is the most telling. – *Nick Sousanis*